

Review

Author(s): Leonard Quart

Review by: Leonard Quart

Source: *Cinéaste*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (SUMMER 2003), pp. 42-44

Published by: [Cineaste Publishers, Inc.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41689610>

Accessed: 28-11-2015 13:12 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Cineaste Publishers, Inc. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Cinéaste*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

and so on. For their initial reunion, James stages the scene in a conventional language of dramatic buildup: an establishing shot of James's car on the road followed by a p.o.v. angle through the windshield, then a hand-held camera as James approaches the house. During the Chicago club scene, James employs slow motion and distorted guitar sounds to mimic the drunken state of his protagonist. When Stevie calls his mentor from jail, James later reenacts taking the phone call in order to provide a synchronic image to fit the recorded sound. The film contains sound bridges, as transitions, shock cuts to create contrast, and 'poetic' images such as a rusted mattress spring against the sky, shot from a low angle, to summarize rural poverty. In the final segment, with Stevie's criminal sentencing imminent, James resorts to the old 'ticking clock' mechanism—a device used in *Hoop Dreams* as well—to heighten audience anticipation and cue narrative closure. Indeed, although there is not a hint of condescension or freak-show class bias in his portrayal of backwater subjects, *Stevie* occasionally slips into the musty closet of soap-opera conventions in order to complicate narrative connections. There is simply no other way to explain the digression into sister Brenda's pregnancy woes, an event with only meager bearing on Stevie's plight.

To be sure, none of this is especially alarming. In the brave new world of documentary discourse, directors implicitly assert the value of 'dramatic truth' as equally 'authentic' with, and far more entertaining than, a bogus and contradiction-riddled idea of untutored Reality. Hence, in a notorious 1989 interview, Moore defends his fiddling with historical time in *Roger & Me* by renouncing any obligation to codes of 'documentary' argument, claiming instead a greater freedom under the rubric of 'personal' reflection. This notion of expanded formal options, sometimes called nonfiction/fiction 'hybridity,' is the banner under which a number of recent films parade their use of reenactment, expressive effects, and other narrative strategies. A partial list includes Julia Query and Vicky Funari's *Live Nude Girls, Unite!* (2000), Gail Dolgin and Vicente Franco's *Daughter from Danang* (2002), Jennifer Dworkin's *Love and Diane* (2002), Marina Zenovich's *Who is Bernard Tapie?* (2002), Nathaniel Kahn's *My Architect* (2002), and Charles Guggenheim's *Berga: Soldiers of Another War* (2002). Coincidentally, all but one of these films inscribes a dynamic of personal reciprocity between maker and subject.

Steve James's work exemplifies another recent trend involving the construction of on-screen persona by nonfiction directors. Where Michael Moore rarely allows a moment of self-doubt or ambivalence to pierce his paradoxical projection of rumpled-Everyman-as-fierce-moral-beacon, James's appearances are overflowing with remorse, second-guessing, and confusion.

Janet Cutler and I chastised *Hoop Dreams* in these pages (*Cineaste*, Vol. XXI, No. 3) for failing to recognize potential complicity of the film and its makers in the network of inner-city sports exploitation encompassing mass media, coaches, and college recruiters. It seemed to us that the film assumed it was on the side of angels in portraying two black high school athletes without examining its place in a larger sphere of representations. No such charges can be leveled at *Stevie*, which labors to implicate itself in the painful struggles of its main character.

On the other hand, James's visible professions of 'honesty' and the evidence of his proactive regard for Stevie's welfare raise questions that the film doesn't address—and in truth is probably incapable of addressing. For starters, it never occurs to James to simply stow his equipment in the trunk and assume the role of older, wiser friend rather than 'friend' encircled by camera and boom mike. Nor does James ponder whether, or rather the extent to which, the presence of the camera crew inflects Stevie's crucial decisions. It is clear that the guy is in certain ways quite media-savvy. He has a sense of how his portrait will play out on screen, tries at times to shape a ruthless outlaw image (talking tough, touting his capacity for violence), and surely knows enough not to confess on camera to molesting his cousin, despite the urging of James to do so. The haunting question for me is whether Stevie's initial refusal to cop a plea is influenced by the filming process; that is, is he afraid to come off as a wimp, as well as a child molester, on screen? Of course there's no way to know, and to his credit James the social actor—not the director—provides his subject with sensible advice. Yet it is plausible to suggest that, at the least, the filming added to Stevie's lack of clarity.

Finally, I became increasingly apprehensive about Stevie's ability to choose *not* to appear on camera. Yes, this contradicts the point just made but never mind. Unlike the sleazy self-promoting geeks populating the films of Errol Morris or Nick Broomfield, the implicit pact between Stevie and his intrusive chronicler is decidedly unbalanced; there's very little in it for Stevie. He uses his 'face-time' to rail against mom, rehearse a wan version of the mythical rebel, and, as James notes, trade visual access for quality time with a mentor. But is he truly capable of yelling "Cut!" and walking away? Nearly everyone, including the mother of the abused girl, agrees that Stevie is still a child at heart, his vision of the world less nuanced even than that of his retarded girlfriend, the tough-guy trappings a desperate masquerade concealing pervasive fear, loneliness, and vulnerability. James often talks to him as if to a child and repeatedly juxtaposes snapshots of a sweet-faced young boy with shots of the bearded, tattooed, pony-tailed miscreant.

What does it mean then for this legal adult to have given the filmmaker 'informed

consent'? If James were filming minors or the mentally ill, the nature of consensual competence would be an important issue. To be clear, I am not arguing that *Stevie* should not have been made. It is a fascinating, sobering portrait—actually a double portrait, given the conspicuous role of the director. It does, however, bring to light complex ethical questions, which the current wave of personal docs solicit more directly than previous nonfiction modes. Back in the real world, I sincerely hope that whatever shitty prison Stevie is rotting away in does not receive HBO or PBS or whatever channel acquires broadcast rights to James's film. Regardless of the honors it garners for James and company, I'm certain it will not gain Stevie any admirers among his fellow inmates.—Paul Arthur

The Pianist

Produced by Roman Polanski, Robert Benmussa and Alain Sarde; directed by Roman Polanski; screenplay by Ronald Harwood, based on the book by Wladyslaw Szpilman; cinematography by Pawel Edelman; production design by Allan Starski; art direction by Nenad Pecur; edited by Herve de Luze; costume design by Anna Sheppard; music by Wojciech Kilar; starring Adrien Brody, Frank Finlay, Maureen Lipman, Ed Stoppard and Emilia Fox. Color, 149 minutes. A Focus Features Release

The Pianist is adapted from Warsaw concert pianist and composer Wladyslaw (Wladek) Szpilman's plainly written but moving 1946 memoir of the same name. In the main, the film adheres very closely to the memoir, both in detail and in its cool, controlled tone. Given that director Roman Polanski himself escaped the Krakow Ghetto at seven years old and his mother died in Auschwitz, it's the film most emotionally close to his own experience, though not in any way based on it. The film's narrative is chronological (beginning with the German invasion in September 1939 and ending with Poland's 'liberation' by the Russians in January 1945) and linear, and Polanski doesn't indulge in crosscutting, montage, or any other displays of cinematic virtuosity. The film opens with Szpilman imperturbably playing a Chopin nocturne on Warsaw radio as the Germans begin to bombard the city. Szpilman, performed with grace, muted expressiveness and power by a very angular Adrien Brody (who is on the screen in almost every scene), is a pampered, successful member of a large assimilated, cultivated Jewish family—a segment of Warsaw's population of 350,000 Jews.

Polanski, following the memoir's lead, is not interested in providing us with more than a sketch of this warm family. He, like Szpilman, views them totally from the outside, so they are not really individuated, nor do we understand much about the family dynamic except that Wladek and his angry,



Wladyslaw Szpilman (Adrien Brody, center) and his family in Roman Polanski's *The Pianist*.

cynical younger brother are always at each other's throats. When the Germans occupy Warsaw, they pass humiliating discriminatory laws, and the Jews are forced to wear armbands branded with a Star of David. Soon Szpilman and his family, along with nearly a half million other Jews, are penned into the teeming, roiling one and a third square miles of the Warsaw Ghetto.

The first half of *The Pianist* centers on the experience in the ghetto of Szpilman and his family. Polanski evokes the systematic dehumanization they endure, but he does so with a striking lack of theatrics or emotional manipulation. Some of his imagery is taken straight from Nazi documentaries depicting life in the Warsaw ghetto. The dead litter the street, the tattered poor beg or crawl abjectly to slurp up spilled soup from the ground, others become mad and roam about aimlessly, and little boys, risking their lives, sneak dangerously in and out of holes made in the ghetto's walls, smuggling in food from the outside. The Nazis gratuitously brutalize and murder without restraint or reason. In one scene, they toss an old man in a wheelchair over a balcony, and in another, they sadistically make old and crippled Jews perform a grotesque dance just to enjoy a sardonic laugh and display their power to debase.

Polanski examines the variety of ways the ghetto's inhabitants respond to their incarceration, and does so in a notably clear-eyed, unsentimental way. He never romanticizes the Holocaust's victims. A great many of the wealthy collaborate, and make money out of poverty—social class playing the same role in the ghetto as it does in the outside world. Younger men with connections gain special privileges by serving in the ghetto police, aiding the Nazis in the repression of their fellow Jews (though they are ultimately fated for extinction like everybody else in the ghetto). A brave socialist and his family cheerily print anti-Nazi pamphlets

and help to organize the ghetto resistance movement. The rest of the population try to survive (most of them removed from the activities of the resisters), and, along the way, become inured to the horror that confronts them every day. When lined up in a compound before being deported on the death trains, some try to comfort themselves with the logical notion, against all contrary evidence, that the Germans won't destroy them because they need their labor. But most, silently and mournfully, accept that there is no escaping their destiny. Polanski captures the terrifying nature of the ghetto ethos with great economy, without ever underlining its profound misery or coercing the audience's sympathies with manipulative close-ups.

Meanwhile Wladek, to make money, plays piano in a café for a crass, moneyed Jewish clientele. As is his wont, he remains detached from his audience, which one senses he quietly scorns. (In the memoir, Szpilman writes that the ghetto experience shattered his belief in the "solidarity of the Jews.") Polanski never makes explicit what Wladek is feeling—even if he has any particular feeling about being a Jew. We know he is a sharp-eyed, remote, solitary man, who, though liked by the people to whom he relates, does not seem close to anybody, including his family—though he feels loyalty toward them. He remains an opaque figure throughout the film—an apolitical, not especially heroic or anti-heroic person, who has two passions—music and his own intense desire for survival. He is also graced with astonishing luck that allows him to escape deportation, as the rest of his family head towards their death.

It's true that Wladek has sufficient courage to offer help to the ghetto resistance, but though he aids them in acquiring arms, he's already left the ghetto and is in hiding by the time the doomed revolt takes place in 1943. One knows, however, that

Wladek is not an activist, but a keen observer who watches events unfold, from a distance, through the windows of the flats in which he's hiding. In the second half of the film, Polanski depicts the Polish underground hiding Wladek by moving him from flat to flat. He's first moved to a flat a block away from the ghetto, where he despairingly watches a vastly outnumbered resistance movement heroically holding out against the Nazis, and sees the ghetto ultimately enveloped in flames with the few survivors lined up and killed.

Polanski does not fully detail Wladek's time of hiding, but we see that much of his energy is spent acquiring enough food to keep alive. He's essentially alone in hiding (except for the sporadic visits from Polish underground members who bring him food) with his thoughts and his fingers compulsively miming the playing of some soundless Chopin nocturne from memory. The music is one thing we see him aching long for—summed up in a brief scene where, before being transferred to another flat, he poignantly watches a Polish woman friend practicing on the cello. Wladek may have a capacity for solitude, but this time his loneliness is not a choice, it is forced on him by the Nazis. He writes in his memoir that in hiding he "was lonelier than anyone else in the world." By the time the Polish underground revolts in the summer of 1944, the film shows him looking half-mad. Through parted curtains he watches the sixty-three-day armed struggle between the Polish Home Army and the German troops that concludes with the total destruction of Warsaw and the loss of 250,000 Polish (non-Jewish) lives among the 950,000 who still lived there.

With his flat being shelled and the Germans burning to the ground everything that is still standing, a gaunt, wraithlike Wladek escapes the German troops by hiding in an abandoned hospital. When the shooting stops, he flees into a blasted Warsaw. This visually striking scene—an extreme long shot of Wladek clambering over the rubble-filled streets—is followed by his miraculously being given another turn of good fortune. He is discovered by a German army officer, Capt. Hosenfeld, who, upon learning he's a pianist, asks him to play. In what may seem like a scene straight out of Hollywood, Wladek plays Chopin with astonishing fluidity, as if he were still sitting in the 1939 Warsaw Radio studio, and the years of degradation and imprisonment had not intervened. However difficult it is for the film viewer to suspend disbelief here, Polanski is sticking close to the memoir where Szpilman describes his playing as permeated with despair and a sense of loss: "The glassy, tinkling sounds of the untuned strings rang through the flat and stairway, floated through the villa on the other side of the street, and returned as a muted, melancholy echo." What is most arresting about Szpilman's relationship to his music is that it is

the key to his identity, and yet the film never suggests that music saves him. *The Pianist* also doesn't intimate that there is any causal link between a nation or individual's love for music, and being humane or moral.

The film offers no explanation for what prevents Hosenfeld from taking Wladek's life. But from Hosenfeld's diary, whose extracts were published with Szpilman's memoir, we learn that he was a religious man who saw the Nazis as "riff-raff" and "brutes," and himself as a "coward" for allowing the "crimes to be committed." The diary also informs us that Hosenfeld, while trying to adhere to "God's commandments," was able to courageously save a few other people besides Wladek from death.

Hosenfeld is just one of the characters that Polanski, adhering to Szpilman, uses to grant the film a sense of balance and objectivity—though almost all the Germans in the film are barbaric. Polanski's Poles run the gamut from Szpilman's prewar artistic friends who are willing to risk their lives for him, to a con-man underground member who derisively steals the money that he is supposedly raising to feed Szpilman. And there are anti-Semitic Poles (in most films seen as characteristic Polish behavior), who, spying Wladek hiding in a flat, attempt to turn him over to the Nazis.

The Pianist is remarkably devoid of melodrama, suspense, and voyeurism—the anti-Schindler's List of Holocaust films. Despite its subject, it is Polanski's most deliberate and least sensational work. Its cumulative power comes from Polanski's gift for compression and quiet intelligence, and his willingness to trust in simply telling the unadorned truth. The uniqueness of *The Pianist* lies in its capacity to evoke the horrific world of the Holocaust without ever constructing virtuoso set pieces like the destruction of the Krakow Ghetto sequence in *Schindler's List*, or revving up the tension and action so that we are constantly being shocked and excited. In fact, most of the violent action in *The Pianist* is glimpsed in long shot.

The Pianist's point of view is a modest one. It is Wladek's perspective that dominates almost every scene in the film, allowing us to see and experience only what he does. Given that Wladek is essentially apolitical, we learn little about the complex politics of the ghetto resistance (e.g., internecine struggles between Bundists, Left Labor Zionists, General Zionists, and Communists) or of the nefarious role that the Soviet Union and the Communists played in the Warsaw Uprising. (The Red Army, a few miles away on the right bank of the Vistula, held back from the struggle and offered no aid to the resistance, thereby ensuring that the Polish Communists, and not the non-Communist Home Army, would take power after the war.)

Wladek is not larger than life—he's no heroic antihero like Schindler, who literally dwarfs everybody around him. He survives

because of luck rather than bravery. He's so undramatic and silent a figure that the film moves us to view the Holocaust (as it should be seen) as a collective rather than an individual tragedy. As a result, the solidity and gravity of *The Pianist* gets closer to the heart of the Holocaust than any narrative film that I have ever seen. It is Polanski's most personal, most constrained, and least perverse film—the antithesis of earlier successes like *Rosemary's Baby* and *Repulsion*.—Leonard Quart

Spellbound

Produced by Jeff Blitz and Sean Welch; directed by Jeff Blitz; cinematography by Jeff Blitz; edited by Yana Gorskaya; original music by Daniel Hulsizer; sound recording by Sean Welch. Color, 97 mins. A ThinkFilm release.

Who says you can't make real documentary in this era of advocacy journalism? In *Spellbound*, young filmmaker Jeff Blitz has managed to tell the story of the 1999 Scripps-Howard National Spelling Bee in what he has called "a soft voice." Certainly this film doesn't come across with the strident personalism that marks, say, the work of current icon Michael Moore. This filmmaker stays out of the way, nor does the narrative intrude to suggest to the viewer what it all means. This is not to say, however, that the film doesn't deliver an intense, sometimes wrenching experience. In fact, *Spellbound* succeeds mainly because the rhetorical line is not carried by voice at all, but by the images themselves and their juxtapositions.

Spellbound is a film that evokes a variety of strong emotions, but it remains refreshingly clear of polemic. The audience with whom I watched the screening, sophisticated New Yorkers all, were obviously ready for a Wiseman *High School*-like satire and laughed at all the early images at the beginning. It wasn't long, however, before they stopped snickering at the kids, their parents and teachers, and got caught up in the harsh, uncompromising reality of the contest.

In the long run this film goes against our prejudices about such subject matter, becoming, surprisingly, a largely positive statement about American values. Maybe even against his own instincts, Blitz comes to admire the spellers and even to understand their quest. He seems to be finding in the triviality of a spelling bee two features of American life much remarked but not often shown so effectively: competition and opportunity.

The film opens with a long, nearly unbearable close-up of a young boy's face in agony. In quick succession we see confusion, panic, and finally despair as he fails to spell the word 'banns.' When he finally settles on 'b-a-n-d-s' his face falls when the ominous bell sounds that signals to him and all the world that he has lost.

The boy whose suffering we see so intensely is Harry, one of eight middle schoolers who exemplify the toughness and dedication that brings the few—249 out of the many thousands who compete at local levels—to the finals. In his thousands of hours of preparation Harry had never encountered that word. Later we see him admitting his mistake but blaming the pronouncer, claiming he said the word with an audible 'd.' We see also his mother, disappointed but resigned, complaining that a Catholic might have had a better chance of knowing that word but conceding that a Protestant had been given 'yenta' in an earlier round.

Harry is one of eight finalists intensely examined in the film. They represent a class of Americans that has had something of an unfavorable press these past hundred years or so—an educational elite. The reasons why excellence in education has been eclipsed by various forms of academic populism has to do with our history, John Dewey, and Columbia Teachers College, among other factors. But the result is incontrovertible: Imagine, for example, a presidential candidate who, instead of promoting a slogan like 'No Child Left Behind' had promised 'Finding and Training the Best.' Most of the electorate, and certainly the NEA, would be unimpressed, if not downright hostile.

The finalists may represent an educational elite, but they form a curiously disparate, characteristically American group. Angela is the daughter of immigrant Mexicans who never learned English. As a champion speller, she is self-taught, self-trained and self-motivated. Neil is a superachiever whose superachieving father has supplied him with language tutors—French, German, and Spanish—as well as a special spelling coach. He tells us that he has paid several hundreds of people in his native India to chant prayers for Neil's success and, if he wins, he has promised a celebratory meal for a thousand of his countrymen.

Nupur, whose parents, like Neil's, are from India, divides her time between spelling and playing the violin, both of which she does with quiet dedication. April is from rust-belt Pennsylvania and describes her parents as "like Archie and Edith Bunker," which they are. Ted's classmates in his Missouri middle school care mainly about sports and trucks. Of them he says wistfully that there are "a couple of smart people in my grade, but not many." His teacher says kindly that going to Washington will be good for Ted so that he will find out there are other people in the world like him.

Ashley, a chubby black girl from the D.C. Projects, has improbably fastened on the National Spelling Bee as her goal. "My life is like a movie," she says enthusiastically. She contrasts sharply with Emily, a girl from suburban New Haven whose interests besides spelling are equestrianism and a cap-